



Montgomery County Council

*From the Offices of
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For Immediate Release

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Statement on the Montgomery Public Schools Operating Budget

We want to acknowledge the excellent job that Jennifer Hughes has done in highlighting issues in a way that should command our attention. We support her work and encourage MCPS to respond to the questions she has summarized in the packet to the Council for today's session. We need a timely response by the school system to all of these questions and to any additional questions that Councilmembers may have. This is critical.

There is much to be pleased about in this budget. The state of Maryland and the federal government are beginning to assume a fairer proportion of costs associated with educating our children. But the fact that the source of this money is not local does not relieve us of the responsibility to be good stewards. After all, much of this money originated from the pockets of Montgomery County taxpayers.

And we are talking about significant amounts of money. For FY03, we are about to approve almost \$34 million dollars for 57 Title 1 elementary schools. This translates to almost \$700,000 additional dollars above regular allocations for each of these schools and it doesn't include the resources directed to these schools through a wide array of other supplemental school programs.

Last year, the Council initiated an Intensive Budget Review ("IBR") process to review budgets in a meaningful and systemic way. It is critical that the school system—with expenditures that account for close to half of the entire county budget—accelerate efforts to identify programs that are duplicative or simply not effective. We need this analysis. We need a comprehensive base budget review. We need to know what works and what doesn't work. It is

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particularly important that we have evaluation tools in place as we begin to receive additional state and federal funds. If we are struggling with this now, the problem will only be magnified in the years to come. We need a budget that will be transparent to the Council and to the community.

This is also true for technology and special programs. The College and the County government have done a reasonably good job establishing guidelines for managing their technology's needs. MCPS needs to do the same. We are about to launch the Downcounty Consortium and very much want to see this group of schools succeed. However, recent community concerns and the status of the program have raised significant questions. There is no consistent policy for determining when and how to introduce special programs, be they signature or not. The school system may have good reasons for not replicating the Northeast Consortium but the rationale is not clear. Current proposals appear to ignore lessons learned from that experience, particularly the need to create community support and set clear standards.

Many people in Montgomery County who do not have children in public schools see their priorities go unfunded. Too many parents of students in our schools don't understand the budgetary decisions being made by MCPS. We need more meaningful data on school by school expenditures. We must also be sensitive to the concerns of our special education students.

We strongly support MCPS and the budget, but saying the lion's share of the budget is devoted to salaries is not adequate. Salaries support positions, and those positions drive programs, and those programs should have proven utility. It is that simple.

We say all this because it has been a lean year for most county agencies. Every Councilmember up here has sat through a committee meeting and has had to say no to projects, programs, and personnel that could benefit the community. Throughout the budget session we have made many decisions that affect children's lives and the dollars in these programs pale in comparison to the MCPS budget.

Public school education has been, and always will be, at the top of the county's priority list. But we cannot lose sight of the fact that children live in families and communities, and sometimes children benefit when the rest of government and the greater community are also supported.

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